Three stages to word processing

A team of four is the heart of an evolutionary approach
for the smaller professional or business organization

by Bernard Sternin

Many of us sense that the one-to-one, executive-secretary unit is too small to operate efficiently in modern office situations. It cannot obtain the benefits of specialization and systemization. It cannot make full use of the capacity of modern dictation and typing equipment. Worst of all, no one is stimulated to keep abreast of developing technology in word processing.

Nevertheless, many in management are reluctant to abandon the customary executive-secretary arrangement. The traditional one-to-one arrangement keeps the secretary in close touch with her executive's work. Consequently, he is spared the need to spell out every detail. Further, many executives hesitate to experiment. New approaches often seem to require a major upheaval. Many executives fear possible conflict with office associates.

What is proposed here is a plan geared to the needs of smaller business and professional organizations by which reorganization can evolve gradually. Initially, only a few people are involved; established procedures remain in effect throughout the rest of the office. But in time

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the plan will permit growth from a small nucleus to a full scale word processing system. The goal is not only to save on stenographic costs. It is to foster the personal and professional growth of the entire staff, executives and secretaries alike.

This approach is based on a team of four—two executives and two secretaries—whose work will be integrated to achieve the benefits of specialization and permit more efficient use of modern office equipment. Since these four individuals will represent the organization's initial exposure to the new approach and to the equipment which will become a part of it, all should be motivated to make it work.

The program should proceed in three stages. In the first, the goal is to resolve problems, define responsibilities, and interject a degree of specialization as a foundation for the introduction of advanced equipment.

In the second stage, the team members jointly consider how to increase their value to the organization. They evaluate the use of dictation equipment, automatic typewriters, copying equipment, and supporting systems techniques.

In the third stage, other teams are added. This step may consist of organizing teams which parallel the operations of the first. However, the contribution of all teams may be further increased by sharing common typing facilities.

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STAGE 1

As soon as the initial team of four has been organized, the first step should be the division of work between the two secretaries on the basis of typing and non-typing responsibilities.

Relieved of most typing, the administrative secretary's role increasingly becomes that of administrative assistant or para-professional.

The typing station becomes the ideal proving ground for an automatic typewriter and other equipment. As increasing specialization among other team members leads to development of new systems and approaches, the typing specialist should simultaneously develop supporting methods. As a result, she will gain experience and expertise with automated equipment and systems approaches.

Initially, the team executives may work independently, routing their typing and non-typing work to the team typist and administrative secretary respectively. But where appropriate, they should consider dividing their work in a way that will increase their productivity.

In a law firm, for example, one particularly effective division is to have one executive handle all non-paperwork aspects of their work, such as interviews, out-of-office visits, examinations, hearings, conferences, telephone negotiations and the like. The other takes on the paperwork for both. In a firm whose practice is heavily paperwork, one executive can handle work which has been structured or reduced to standard responses, leaving the other free to handle the unusual, nonroutine, and therefore time-consuming items. This approach requires periodic review of work division as more and more functions are analyzed and standardized.

The rearrangement of work among the four team members will result in increased capacity through grouping of tasks and specialization.

Similar jobs can be done at the same time and place, or in a similar way. For example, if one executive handles all out-of-office visits, he will be able to group them to cover several efficiently.

Specialization gives each individual enough of the same kind of work so that he does not need to study all aspects of each job. He can develop forms and dictation procedures for doing repetitive tasks. For example, if one executive handles all inquiries, he will become familiar with recurring situations and will be able to dictate responses rapidly.

The four team members will also be able to schedule work better and develop efficient routines.

The administrative secretary will find that her new work falls into patterns best arranged by time of day (mail, filing) or by the day of the week (payroll) or month (taxes). This work does not mix well with typing, which has a timetable of its own. The typing specialist will be able to plan a more efficiently scheduled day of concentrated work without jumping back and forth between typing and other responsibilities.

STAGE 2

In the second stage, the team executives can maximize results by concentrating on areas in which the firm does a sizeable volume of business and those which lend themselves to systematic arrangement and automation.

Introducing an automatic typewriter at this stage can expand output several times over. It can be used to do three kinds of work:

Drafting. The operator uses the machine just to correct typographical errors. She does each job in two steps, first as fast as she can, correcting any typing mistakes by backspacing and striking over to correct the recording. The recording (tape or card) is then played back to produce an error-free final copy. The typist can work at her fastest speed, and because the recording is letter-perfect, there is no need to correct errors on multiple copies, an annoyance often more time-consuming than the typing itself.

Revision. The operator retypes material as the author revises it. The equipment retypes unchanged text at high speed automatically, and unwanted language is skipped by the use of appropriate control keys. Only new text must be typed manually, minimizing additional proofreading.

Repetitive typing. Commonly used units of language—paragraphs, form letters, names and addresses—are recorded in advance. Later they can be used in many combinations, often supplemented by manual additions from the machine's keyboard. In addition to the advantages of high-speed and error-free work, the operator's hands are freed to do the collateral work associated with typing: obtaining needed information, setting up stationery, separating finished papers, collating, and the like, all of which may be done while the machine is typing.

Specialization will also enhance the team's ability to use dictation equipment. For many executives, dictation to a secretary is a mix of
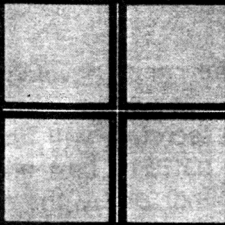
STAGE 1   STAGE 2
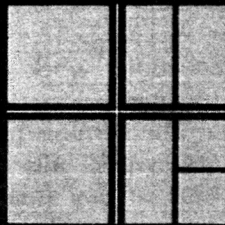
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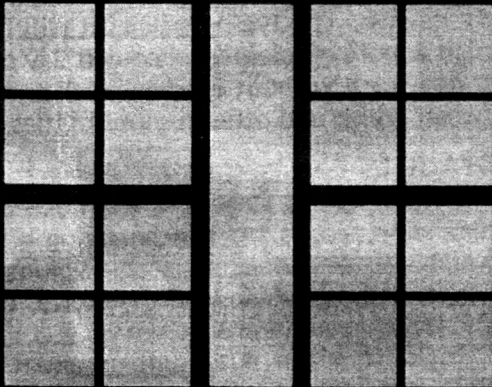
The diagrams show division of work in the three stages described. In the first, a team of four — two executives and two secretaries — is formed and specialized tasks are undertaken by each member. In the second stage, additional people can be added to assist in any of the four work areas. In the third stage, several teams are augmented by a central typing station.

language she is to type and instructions for things she is to do, many unrelated to typing. The latter usually requires some conversation, one reason many executives hesitate to use dictating equipment. In many such situations, the executive may find that he can give instructions to the administrative secretary face-to-face and rely on her to obtain any additional information required. At that point, the administrative secretary may use dictating equipment to transmit the entire job to the typing specialist.

If one executive concentrates primarily on paperwork for the team, as was suggested previously, he will be motivated to explore and develop techniques for the effective use of dictating equipment. If one executive handles the well-structured repetitive type of work while the other concentrates on the unusual and non-routine, the former will probably find that he can transmit most of his work directly to the typing specialist with dictating equipment. The latter executive may need to employ the team secretary more heavily, and may prefer the conventional face-to-face approach. In any case, the team arrangement should provide the environment in which an alert group can utilize the best in modern technology.

Capacity can be considerably extended within the framework of the team of four. Non-professional personnel may be employed. More equipment may be utilized. Each team member could develop a staff or even head a department. This kind of organizational approach may be entirely sufficient to accomodate the growth of many smaller firms, and for them organization beyond stage two may be unnecessary.

It is important that the team of four be viewed as an abstraction. It need not be administered by four people. In some instances, one of the four functions may require several persons. In others, one person may be able to cover two functions. The team approach is a concept of work division which should be freely modified in function and membership to fit individual situations.

STAGE 3

In the third stage, the team of four concept may be employed to form additional units.

The most efficient pattern of growth is usually to organize one more team after the first is functioning, rather than to establish several more at once. Then, when both teams are working well, supplement the work of the two by introducing a central typing station.

Central typing, as the term is used here, is a location at which automatic typewriters process those items of work which have been standardized and prerecorded. By centralizing the typing of repetitive materials, the team typing specialists are freed to concentrate on the non-routine, and to utilize their automatic equipment for revision typing. Another important function of the central typing station is to run off in final form material which team typing specialists and executives have drafted to completion. In that way, utilization of the typing specialists can be further improved.

Grouping of the repetitive work at a central location will have other benefits. Typists of lesser skill can be used effectively at this work station. Also, handling all repetitive work at one station allows development of extremely efficient systems which can evolve when the same kind of work is handled in volume.

Eventually more and more typing functions may be transferred to this central typing facility. That would make it a true word processing center for the entire organization, yet retain the smaller, more conventional secretarial unit at those points at which it better serves the needs of the office.